

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Marvin Lee Trotter,)	C/A No. 9:09-00542-TLW-BM
)	
Plaintiff,)	
)	REPORT
v.)	AND
)	RECOMMENDATION
)	
Bradley Scott Harris,)	
)	
Defendants.)	
)	

Marvin Lee Trotter (Plaintiff), proceeding *pro se*, brings this action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Plaintiff currently is incarcerated at the Greenville County Detention Center, and files this action *in forma pauperis* under 28 U.S.C. § 1915.* Plaintiff asserts claims for slander, defamation and false imprisonment, and seeks both monetary damages and injunctive relief.

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* complaint pursuant to the procedural provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 1915; 28 U.S.C. § 1915A; the Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996); and in light of the following precedents: *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); *Nasim v. Warden, Md. House of Corr.*, 64 F.3d 951 (4th Cir. 1995) (*en banc*); and *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70 (4th

* This statute permits an indigent litigant to commence an action in federal court without prepaying the administrative costs of proceeding with the lawsuit. To protect against possible abuses of this privilege, the statute allows a district court to dismiss the case upon a finding that the action “fails to state a claim on which relief may be granted,” “is frivolous or malicious,” or “seeks monetary relief against a defendant who is immune from such relief.” 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B). A finding of frivolity can be made where the complaint “lacks an arguable basis either in law or in fact.” *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. at 31. Further, under § 1915(e)(2)(B), a claim based on a meritless legal theory may be dismissed *sua sponte*. *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989); *Allison v. Kyle*, 66 F.3d 71 (5th Cir. 1995).



Cir. 1983). This Court is required to liberally construe *pro se* documents, *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89 (2007), holding them to a less stringent standard than those drafted by attorneys, *Estelle v. Gamble*, 429 U.S. 97 (1976); *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 9 (1980). Even under this less stringent standard, however, the *pro se* complaint is subject to summary dismissal. The requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Dep't of Soc. Servs.*, 901 F.2d 387 (4th Cir. 1990).

Discussion

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction. *Woodward v. Newcourt Commercial Fin. Corp.*, 60 F. Supp. 2d 530, 531 (D.S.C. 1999). “[A district court must jealously protect its jurisdiction, declining to entertain those cases over which it has no jurisdiction but insisting on hearing those matters properly before it.”] Because federal courts have limited subject matter jurisdiction, there is no presumption that the court has jurisdiction. *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick*, 191 F.3d 394, 399 (4th Cir. 1999), *cert. denied*, *Pinkley, Inc. v. Servacek*, 528 U.S. 1155 (2000) (citing *Lehigh Mining & Mfg. Co. v. Kelly*, 160 U.S. 337, 327 (1895)). “Furthermore, it is always incumbent upon a federal court to evaluate its jurisdiction *sua sponte*, to ensure that it does not decide controversies beyond its authority.” *Davis . Pak*, 856 F.2d 648, 650 (4th Cir. 1988).

The two most commonly recognized and utilized bases for federal court jurisdiction are (1) “federal question,” 28 U.S.C. § 1331, and (2) “diversity of citizenship.” 28 U.S.C. § 1332. “[T]he facts providing the court jurisdiction must be affirmatively alleged in the complaint.” *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick*, 191 F.3d at 399 (citing *McNutt v. General Motors Acceptance Corp.*, 298 U.S. 178 (1936)). To this end, Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(1) requires that the complaint provide “a short plain statement of the grounds for the court's jurisdiction,”

Additionally, even if a complaint does not contain “an affirmative pleading of a jurisdictional basis [] a federal court may [still] find that it has jurisdiction if the facts supporting jurisdiction have been clearly pleaded.” *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick*, 191 F.3d at 399 (citing 2 *Moore's Federal Practice* § 8.03[3] (3d ed. 1997)). However, if the court, viewing the allegations in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, finds insufficient allegations in the pleadings, the court will lack subject matter jurisdiction. *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999).

Here, the allegations in this complaint are brief. Plaintiff sets forth his claim as follows verbatim:

On 10/28/08 Bradley Scott Harris gave a statement, which was completely false to Deputy Hayden. In the statement Bradley Harris states, that I broke into a house with him, in which case I did not and I was not with him. By Bradley Harris giving this false statement, He committed perjury by lying in a statement, He committed Slander, and Character Defamation by lying and saying I was with him. And being this false statement got me put in jail, He is also responsible for false imprisonment.

(Compl. at 3.)

Based on these allegations, Plaintiff is alleging federal question jurisdiction under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, based on a violated Fourth Amendment liberty interest. However, this action fails to state a claim against the defendant.

In order to state a cause of action under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege that: (1) the defendant(s) deprived him or her of a federal right, and (2) did so under color of state law.[i.e., “state action”]. *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980). Because the United States Constitution regulates only the Government, not private parties, a litigant claiming that his constitutional rights have been violated must first establish that the challenged conduct constitutes “state action.” See, e.g., *Blum v. Yaretsky*, 457 U.S. 991, 1002 (1982). To qualify as state action, the conduct in question “must be caused by the exercise of some right or privilege created by the

State or by a rule of conduct imposed by the State or by a person for whom the State is responsible," and "the party charged with the [conduct] must be a person who may fairly be said to be a state actor." *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 937 (1982); see *United States v. International Brotherhood of Teamsters, Chauffeurs, Warehousemen Helpers of America, AFL-CIO*, 941 F.2d 1292 (2d Cir.1991).

According to the complaint, the named defendant is a witness in Plaintiff's pending state court criminal case. This does not constitute state action on the part of the defendant, nor do the facts imply that the defendant is a state actor. Therefore, Plaintiff has failed to set forth sufficient facts or allegations to maintain a federal question claim in this Court.

As to Plaintiff's allegations of slander and defamation, these are causes of action based on state law. Through the exercise of "supplemental jurisdiction," federal courts may hear and decide state law claims in conjunction with federal law claims. *Wisconsin Dep't of Corr. v. Schacht*, 524 U.S. 381, 387 (1998). However, because Plaintiff has asserted no viable federal claims, this Court cannot exercise "supplemental" jurisdiction over any state claims being asserted. See *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d at 655 ("[T]he Constitution does not contemplate the federal judiciary deciding issues of state law among non-diverse litigants.").

Finally, a civil action encompassing Plaintiff's state claims could be cognizable in this Court under the federal diversity statute, if that statute's requirements are satisfied. *Cianbro Corp. v. Jeffcoat & Martin*, 804 F. Supp. 784, 788-91 (D.S.C. 1992), *aff'd*, 10 F.3d 806 (4th Cir. 1993)[Table]. The diversity statute requires complete diversity of parties and an amount in controversy in excess of seventy-five thousand dollars (\$75,000). See 28 U.S.C. § 1332(a). Complete diversity of parties in a case means that no party on one side may be a citizen of the same State as any party on the other side. See *Owen Equip. & Erection Co. v. Kroger*, 437 U.S. 365, 372-

74 (1978). The service documents submitted by Plaintiff imply that all parties are located in the State of South Carolina. Additionally, Plaintiff seeks only ten thousand dollars (\$10,000) in damages. Accordingly, this Court has no diversity jurisdiction over this case because Plaintiff and the defendant are both “citizens” of the State of South Carolina, which defeats the required complete diversity of parties, and Plaintiff’s damages request does not meet the threshold requirement for the amount in controversy.

Therefore, this case should be dismissed because the complaint fails to allege facts establishing either federal question or diversity jurisdiction in this Court.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the Court dismiss the complaint in the above-captioned case *without prejudice* and without issuance and service of process. *See United Mine Workers v. Gibbs*, 383 U.S. 715 (1966); *see also Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319, 324-25 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972).

Plaintiff's attention is directed to the important notice on the next page.



Bristow Marchant
United States Magistrate Judge

March 18, 2009
Charleston, South Carolina

Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The parties are advised that they may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Court Judge. Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections. In the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must “only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005).

Specific written objections must be filed within ten (10) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b). The time calculation of this ten-day period excludes weekends and holidays and provides for an additional three (3) days for filing by mail. Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a) & (e). Filing by mail pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

Larry W. Propes, Clerk
United States District Court
Post Office Box 835
Charleston, South Carolina 29402

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).